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Left Front Government and some aspects of its activities in rural areas

A study by an observer

Government of West Bengal

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LAND REFORMS AND THE LEFT FRONT GOVERNMENT

It is well-known that it is not possible for a State Government under the Constitution of India to take up a programme of radical land reforms either by modification of existing Acts or by legislating new ones. Land reforms is one of the basic questions in the Indian context. The pattern of land utilisation or in other words land system in our rural economy is interlinked with the life of ordinary villager in such a way that mere political goodwill achieves little. What is primarily necessary is mobilisation of the entire democratic force and active intervention by the organised village poor in support of the common people or their cause. Without that even limited land reforms programme will remain a non-starter. Within the bounds of a constitution of a capitalist-landlord state, a constituent State Government cannot abolish the system of Zamindary, nor is it a feasible proposition. The State Government can only ameliorate the sufferings of the peopl… rouse the village … can enthuse ther… organising capability. Through this process only, class enemy in the rural areas can be identified and cornered, thereby opening up new horizons for the rural poor. Keeping this objective in view the left front parties, quite conscious of the limited scope of the power of the State Government announced their 36 Point Programme before the people just on the eve of the last Assembly elections. Item No. 16 of the said Programme states that if returned to power the Left Front Government will endeavour to acquire surplus and benami land for its subsequent distribution amongst poor and landless cultivators. To put an end to all forms of concentration of land ownership and to take steps for providing adequate facilities to bargadars (share-croppers), landless cultivators and agricultural labourers by introduction of a comprehensive piece of legislation. Now after the expiry of 36 months of the Left Front Government …ime to assess the performance of …overnment vis-a-vis its programme …election promises in this sector.

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What is to be determined is how far the present Government has succeeded in fulfilling its declared programme, to what objective it is striving for, and whether the measures already taken are playing a positive role in lessening the hardship of the common people.

The ruling classes had all along made tall promises on the eve of elections during the last thirty years of Congress rule. But after formation of Government on each occasion in that period those election promises proved to be simply election speeches without any substance. For obvious reasons people at large are not now interested in mere promises. The success and failure of a Government or the extent of its commitment to the people depends on the degree of its sincerity to effectively implement the programme. By this yardstick only the performance of the Left Front Government during the last 36 months should be judged.

Under the existing land tenure system two questions confront us which are dimetrically opposed to each other and quite discernible in the rural sector of economy. The lion's share of the village land is concentrated in the hands of big landlords, Zamindars, Jotedars etc. In West Bengal only 4% of the landowners who could be termed as big landowners hold sway over about 40% of the total agricultural land. According to the Census of 1971, the number of people owning land in the villages came down to 44.7%. The number of landless agricultural labourers in West Bengal now stands at 42% through an increase @1.3% per annum over the past years. The owners of small plots of land have not been taken into account in this estimate. There is no doubt that marginal farmers and poor peasants and agricultural labourers who own small plots of land, taken together, constitute more than 70% of the population in the villages. According to the official figures for the period 1961-71, there has been an increase in population in West Bengal by 27.24%. During the corresponding period the rate of increase in the number of employed people is only 9% while that for agricultural labourers is as high as 83.5% in the rural areas.

The rural scene presents us with a grim reality where we find concentration of bulk of the cultivable land in the hands of a few landowners, while there is that insatiable hunger for arable land of innumerable landless labourers and marginal farmers. This situation gives rise to the abject dependence of a large number of village poor on the whims of a few landlords. In the background of this unequal and highly discriminatory social relations a radical change in the present land system is called for.

Long years of misrule under the Congress regime has only accentuated the problems in the rural sector. As a result, big landowners have succeeded in parcelling out the available land amongst their own class or within the same family on various pretexts. To go in for proper legislation for radical

land reforms and to work out a comprehensive plan of action for this purpose will naturally take time. So keeping in view the principal purpose of land reforms, the Left Front Government has accelerated the work of vesting land held at present by the owners of land in violation of ceiling prescribed. Along with intensified distribution of surplus lands amongst the agricultural labourers and poor peasants, and a concentrated programme for protecting the rights of share-croppers in land, the State Government attaches special importance to the work of speedy vesting of surplus lands in Government. To make this programme a success and to overcome legal snags the State Government has even taken steps to amend laws.

The Finance Minister of the former S. S. Roy's cabinet declared in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly on 25.3.77 that out of 10 lakh 49 thousand acres of agricultural land vested in Government, 6 lakh 69 thousand acres could only be distributed till that date. The above figure excluded 1 lakh 61 thousand acres of land held up from the purview of distribution because of issue of court injunctions.

According to the statistics released by the Land and Land Revenue Department of the Left Front Government 11 lakh 17 thousand acres of land has been vested in Government till the end of June, 1979. Although land measuring 1 lakh 70 thousand acres is hit by court orders it has been possible to initiate steps for distribution of 3 lakh 32 thousand acres of land amongst landless poor peasants on the basis of recommendations of the Standing Land Reforms Committee of the elected Panchayat samities.

During the previous regimes there were numerous instances of distribution of land in violation of norms and conditions prescribed for this purpose. In many cases owners of land and persons considered ineligible for being assignees of vested land got the right to enjoy khas land. Even the real allottees of land were denied possession of the lands issued in their favour. By effecting changes in the procedure the Left Front Government has made the Panchayat samities responsible for recommending persons eligible for distribution of vested land. These samities are now acting as Land Reforms Advisory Committees in terms of land reforms rules.

Detailed information about benami lands held in excess by the landlords in violation of the ceiling laws are available with the agricultural labourers, share-croppers, etc. They know who are in actual need of cultivable land, and amongst whom vested lands should be distributed. For obvious reasons objectives provided for in a legislation could be realised for the benefit of the common people only through the efforts of the village poor or their representatives. The elected representatives of the village poor in the Panchayats are now in majority and they are very much active to the problems in the rural economy. So the decision of the Left Front Government to involve

the Panchayats for effecting meaningful land reforms programme is of much importance.

The former Congress Government had never relaxed in extolling its intention about defending the interests of the rural poor. All through their rule they spoke about the need of the share-croppers' right, and, in fact, made some amendments in the relevant Acts. But to what end and what was the objective condition then? The share-croppers had no option but to wait on the whims of the landowners for livelihood. They had no legal right to till land. Nor was there any legal support to draw their share of the produce. As a result the owners of land resorted to evictions of the share-croppers, as and when necessary, without any break. They also got the unlimited scope to deprive the tillers of their due share of the produce. This was a continued process which led to deprivation, and disparity in income in the villages. No information about the actual number of recorded bargadars as per previous settlement operations could be made available from any source before. According to official figures individual plots having names of bargadars recorded numbered 8 lakh 71 thousands. But this does not show the actual number of bargadars as an individual bargadar might work in different plots held by a landowner or might till the land of more than one owner. Further, the names of bargadars are excluded from the purview of settlement records as they have no rights in vested lands as per rules. In most cases landowners had offered only those plots of land to the Government for the purpose of vesting which had names of bargadars recorded. So in the opinion of the Director of Land Records and Survey, West Bengal, the actual number of bargadars as per last settlement operations was not more than 3 lakh 25 thousands in terms of the provisions of the law. Most of the bargadars had no legal right in the share of the produce.

With a view to protecting the poor bargadars' right to cultivate and to prevent eviction of the bargadars by proper recording of their names, the Left Front Government has made a fundamental amendment of the Land Reforms Act. In the amended Act the bargadar has been exempted from the obligation of proving his bonafides as a bargadar. This responsibility has been shifted to the owner of the plot in question who is to furnish necessary papers in support of his contention. Unless proper documents are supplied, the plot in question will be treated as one cultivated by a bargadar.

For prompt recording of the names of the bargadars the present Government has drawn up a time-bound programme named 'Operation Barga' under which it has been possible to get the names of more than 8 lakh bargadars recorded till December, 1979. Of these recorded share-croppers about 2 lakhs belong to the scheduled castes while another 1 lakh are members of the scheduled tribes. The rate of recording of names shows a threefold increase over that of the previous operation.

Lack of finance for agricultural purposes is one of major problems confronting the rural poor. For shortage of institutional finance for such programme, lands of the small peasants and share-croppers pass into the clutches of village money-lenders making the former's position more precarious. In order to extricate these poor people from their age-old dependence on money-lenders the Left Front Government organised a Pilot Project in the last Kharif season in collaboration with five Public Sector Banks for financing bargadars and assignees of vested land. This programme could be operated in 23 selected areas only. Necessary arrangements for providing loans from eleven nationalised banks/ co-operative banks to the bargadars/ assignees of vested lands during the current season have also been made. About 55,000 families have been benefited under this programme. No interest is payable in case of repayment of loan is made within the scheduled time. The State Government will pay the interest.

It has not been possible for the Left Front Government to solve the multifarious problems of the rural poor through various measures directed towards economic uplift of the weaker sections of the society. In fact it is not a feasible proposition within the limited scope and financial power of a State Government. For this reason the Left Front Government has not attempted to confuse the people with all promises of fundamental changes in its 36 Point Election Manifesto. The Manifesto contained those minimum points of action which could be implemented under the existing structure of Government and those partial demands of the rural people which have been considered being just and reasonable in course of the long years of peasant movement. By incorporation of these modest demands into the Election Manifesto the Left Front had sought to acknowledge the importance of the democratic movement involving thousands of people and its impact on changing the course of history. Steps so far taken by the Left Front Government to implement the election promises can be said to be a success. The immediate task is to consolidate these gains and to extend them to other areas. For the progress of rural Bengal this is most important.

'Operation Barga' :

The recording of the names of Bargadars (share-croppers) is a part of the settlement operations for the preparation of Record of Rights.

The struggle of the share-croppers for their rights of cultivation is an important part of the organised Kisan Movement of West Bengal, since the birth of organised Kisan Movement in United Bengal in the year 1937. Just before Independence, in the year 1946 the movement of the share-croppers engulfed the entire State and faced brutal repression and even police firing in many places of the State killing hundreds of people. In Khanpur in the then District of Dinajpur (now West Dinajpur) in one spot only, 22

share-croppers were killed by police firing. It can be safely said that there was a great upheaval amongst the peasantry of the province of Bengal (United Bengal) which forced the then Government of Bengal headed by Late H. S. Surhawardy to pass an act giving 60% of the produce to the share-croppers and 40% to the owners of the land.

This movement is still continuing and has a long tradition. After independence with the growth of the movement new laws have come into force and they have further been amended. But the eviction of share-croppers continued unabated diminishing the number of share-croppers by a considerable percentage.

The Left Front Government having taken office, made new amendments to the Act. The amendments made were as follows :

i) So long in the Act, the onus of proving in the Court that he is a bonafide share-cropper was left on the share-cropper himself.

   In the new amendment the onus of proving that the applicant is not a share-cropper has been given to the owner of the land. It has further been explicitly said in the amendment that the Court shall accept the claim so long the owner of the land is not able to prove otherwise.

ii) So long in the Act the share-cropper had to prove his claim only by submitting necessary documents.

   In the present amendment it has been provided that if evidence is produced by persons residing in the same village where the land is situated or by the peasants cultivating land around the land in dispute it shall also be considered as legal and as conclusive proof in support of the share-cropper.

iii) In the old Act, the owner of the land had the right of resumption for self-cultivation to the extent of half of the total land in possession of the share-cropper.

   In the new amendment the word self-cultivation has been defined as cultivation by the manual labour of the owner of the land or of a member of the owner's family and not by employing hired labour as defined in the previous Act.

iv) In the new amendment an owner of the land who wants to avail himself of the right of resumption must prove that he resides in the village where the land in question is situated at least for the major part of the year.

v) In the new amendment it has been clearly stated that the owner, if he wants to avail himself of the right of resumption, must prove that the land in question is his major source of income for maintaining his family.

vi) In the new amendment clear provision has been made to the effect that if the owner after receiving notice duly does not

accept the share of the produce from the share-croppers will be liable for a fine upto Rs. 500/- and imprisonment upto 6 months or both.

By strengthening the law in favour of the share-croppers the Left Front Government went ahead for recording the names of share-croppers within a short period of time to stop evictions as far as possible.

The Left Front Government made limited arrangement for advancing short term crop loans to the recorded bargadars (share-croppers) and for that before the final Record of Rights is published the Government decided to issue certificates to share-croppers whose names have been recorded.

For quick application of the provisions a measure was adopted which is called "Operation Barga". It is implemented in practice by (i) selecting places where there are concentration of share-croppers, (ii) by convening meeting of both the owner and the share-croppers by giving notice to both in all possible legal manner and by beat of drums, (iii) to hear both parties and to examine documents, if any, (iv) to pass judgment and (v) to issue certificates to share-croppers whose names have been recorded.

The result upto 31 December, 1979 is as follows :

Upto June 1977 i.e. upto the date when the Left Front Government came to the office, in not more than 1.50 thousand plots the names of bargadars (share-croppers) were recorded.

Since then upto 30 April, 1980 in 8,54,740 plots the names of share-croppers have been recorded.

June 30, 1980 has been fixed as target date within which this work shall be completed.

The success of Left Front Government at a glance (in land reform) :

1.	Recording the names of share-croppers (Upto April 30,1980)	— 8,54,740
2.	House sites legalised to Agricultural labourers, poor peasants, poor fishermen, poor artisans etc. (Upto 31 December, 1979).	— 41,077
3.	Number of beneficiaries who have received vested land upto 31.3.1980	— 10,44,425 acres
4.	Number of families relieved by land rent for ever	— 45 lakhs
5.	Bank loans advanced to share-croppers and pattaholders of Benami Land	— 59,114 families
6.	Mandays generated upto the end of 1979	— 5.66 crore i.e. 16.98 crore kgs. of wheat 11.32 crores of rupees the village poor including the agricultural labourers and poor peasants have been able to earn more.

IRRIGATION :

Through minor irrigation schemes irrigation facilities have been extended to 1 lakh 52 thousand hectares. Provision to extend this facility to 2 lakh 36 thousnad hectares by spending additional 22 crore 70 lakh and 72 thousand rupees in 1980-81 has been made.

In 1980-81 Budget provisions have been made for 450 deep tubewells, 330 river lift pumps and many shallow tubewells.

Apart from all these excavations of tanks, small irrigation canals, Boro embankments and irrigation wells digging programmes have been undertaken to be executed through the Panchayats. Major Irrigation Schemes, either extended or new schemes like Tista Projects are being undertaken.

Minimum Wages for Agricultural Labourers :

Minimum Wages Act 1948 and its rates have been promulgated in relation to agricultural workers.

When the Left Front Government took office in June, 1977 a case was pending before the High Court challenging the notifications of the provisions of the Congress Government. An injunction was issued by the Court restraining the execution of the minimum wages notification.

Hence the Left Front Government could not enforce the Act. It convened a meeting of all the Kisan and Agricultural Labour Organisations of the State including those of the Congress. It was presided over by the Labour Minister. It was unanimously decided in the meeting that the State being not in a position to implement the Minimum Wages Notification due to High Court injunction. The organisations participating in the meeting will campaign for implementing the minimum wages of Rs. 8 and 8 hours a day through movements organised by respective organisations.

The minimum wages in West Bengal has two parts—(i) wages, and (ii) DA ; at present it is Rs. 9.83.

Old Age Pension for the Kisans :

In the current Budget of the State provisions have been made, fund has been earmarked to extending pensions to an old peasant (all strata of peasants) at the rate of Rs. 65 per month. The beneficiary must reach the age of 60 years and must be a resident of West Bengal for a period of not less than 10 years. Also those who are invalid and are unable to work due to any accident or illness and has attained the age of 55 years will also be eligible to get this pension.

Land Bank :

For recording the names of share-croppers the owners of small non-peasant owners of land became aggrieved. During the last 25th Silver

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Jubilee Session of the Kisan Sabha this problem was discussed at large in the report of its General Secretary and the solution was suggested in organising a Land Bank for purchasing the land of such small non-peasant owners in which the names of share-croppers have been recorded, whenever offered for sale. This organisation will pay the current market price. The market price will be decided on the basis of the price stated in the current sale deeds.

In the current Budget the State Government has accepted the proposal and has allotted money for the purpose.

A person holding not more than one hectare of irrigated and one and a half hectare of non-irrigated land and having an annual income of not more than six thousands will be benefited by this scheme.

RECONSTRUCTION AFTER THE FLOOD OF 1978 :

In the month of August-September 1978 a disaster of a worst kind descended on the State of West Bengal. The devastating flood drowned innumerable villages while lakhs of uprooted people thronged the relief centres set up in the areas affected by the flood. Those unbearable days of horror and uncertainty still haunt the afflicted people like nightmare. This flood of an unprecedented nature caused immense loss to the economy of the State. The State Government in right earnest set to work to repair the battered economy.

With the end of relief operations the task of rehabilitation and reconstruction on a grand scale was taken up. The manner in which relief materials were made available to the thousands of homeless, hungry people despite insurmountable difficulties, created a sense of security in the minds of the affected people. Nobody had to die from starvation nor was there any loss of life because of outbreak of epidemics. No panicky exodus of distressed people towards the metropolitan areas took place. The State Government could draw the whole hearted support and co-operation of the people in executing the work of reconstruction following the flood.

While presenting the State Government's budget estimates for the year 1979-80 in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly the State Finance Minister stated that there was hardly any parallel in recorded history of the magnitude of the devastation rendered by the flood of 1978. The extent of human misery caused was beyond description. So was the loss of national wealth which shattered the economic base of the State. According to the statement of the Finance Minister, the State would take quite a number of years to recover fully from the ravages caused by that year's (1978) deluge. So there is nothing to wonder about that the work of rehabilitation and reconstruction is still going on in full swing in the villages.

As many as twelve districts out of sixteen districts of the State were hit by the flood. The flood havoc ravaged

the entire area covered by the district of Midnapore on the South-West, 24-Parganas district on the South-East and the district of Malda on the northern side. About 38% area of the State or in other words more than 30,000 sq. mt. of land got inundated and one-third of the State's total population had to bear the brunt of this burden. As a result of irreparable loss of capital stocks of diverse kinds—both in the public and private sector—the productive processes over wide area of the State came to a standstill. Along with this grim situation lakhs of people found their avenues of employment and income sealed. So the main concern of the State Government was how to procure the required finance to restore the productive processes throughout the State by compensating the huge loss on capital goods and equipment. The task was to start production in various sectors of the economy without any loss of time.

A comprehensive programme for reconstruction and restoration was formulated.

This programme aimed at the following :–

To start various schemes on construction in order to provide employment to the flood-affected people particularly the poor people till the normal avenues of employment and income were resuscitated ;

To reconstruct all the demolished buildings, numbering about 12 lakhs;

To make arrangements for water supply, repairing of roads/culverts, school buildings, health centres etc. for rebuilding the economic base ;

To provide necessary assistance to the people engaged in cottage and small-scale industries to re-activise their units ;

To render all assistance to the farmers so as to enable them to take farming practices without delay ; and

To operate once again the flood control units which had gone out of order during the floods and to extend irrigation facilities to the farmers.

With the formulation of the comprehensive programme the Panchayat bodies were asked to undertake the greater part of this task through execution of three programmes viz., Food for Work Programme, Rural Development Programme and Rural Reconstruction Programme. The objective of these three programmes was to mobilise and engage the weaker sections of the village people for the purpose of restoration of rural wealth by providing them employment and source of income. A part of the wages was paid in cash while the remainder in foodgrains. From the available figures it is learnt that till June 1979 the Panchayats made arrangements for payment of Rs. 43,65,50,000/- in cash and for distribution of 1,88,355 mt. of foodgrains under the aforesaid three programmes. During the period under review it was possible to create

7,40,10,000 mandays of work for the purpose of rebuilding dwelling houses, repair of roads/culverts, excavation of irrigation canals and improvement of tanks, restoration of agricultural land rendered unsuitable by accumulation of sand during the flood and other programmes of reconstruction.

Beside the three programmes mentioned above, the Zilla Parishads were entrusted with the execution of two programmes viz., Restoration of the Rural Water Supply Programme and the Programme of Reconstruction of school building. The various departments of the State Government were entrusted with the task of economic rehabilitation of the rural artisans and/or owners of small industrial units, repair of national highways and big roads in the districts and refurbishing the irrigation system and flood-control installations.

No work of reconstruction could be taken in hand till roadlinks for transport of necessary materials, equipment, etc. were restored. So repairs of seriously damaged roads/culverts/bridges etc. were taken up on top priority basis. The road link system was completely shattered by the flood. In seven districts of the State all the national highways had large chunks washed away at innumerable points. Some important bridges got severely damaged. Numerous small bridges and culverts left no trace after the floods. About 4,452 kms. of road was rendered absolutely unsuitable for traffic. The connecting links between the headquarters of the State Government district headquarters and sub-divisional headquarters were completely paralysed. But in a record period of time all the main lines of communication could be restored. The work of repairing the roads in the interior of the villages is still going on at a rapid pace. Till the end of last June (1979), repair of roads measuring 40,568 kms. in the rural areas was completed.

Under the rural reconstruction programme the work of building dwelling houses for the lakhs of homeless people was given the first priority in order to provide shelter to those helpless people. The extent of loss on this account was colossal which will be evident from the following figures. About 11.07 lakh dwelling houses were completely washed away while the number of severely damaged houses and partly-damaged residential places stood at 5.92 lakh and 2.05 lakh respectively. The State Government provided foodgrains and money in cash in lieu of labour under the programme. Further, they were given house-building grant for purchase of necessary materials. For facilitating supply of these materials to the intending purchasers 46 depots had been opened in eight districts of the State. The work of building dwelling houses went on for a long time and, according to the figures available, 4,04,766 houses had been built till the month of June, 1979. Even many private organisations had come forward to assist in this welfare programme.

Another item of work taken up on priority basis was the rural water supply

programme. It was so necessary because the rural water supply programme got a jolt in extensive areas of the villages due to the flood. 80 per cent of the work of sinking 4,803 new tubewells and repairing of 2,165 old defunct tubewells was completed by the month of June, 1979. Before the close of March, 1979, 20 rural water supply schemes and 43 municipal water supply schemes were restored on completion of the work of necessary repairs. Along with this the work of disinfecting the water resource is being continued. So far 51,906 tubewells, 77,832 wells and 1,02,857 tanks have been covered under the aforesaid programme.

The programme of rebuilding schools was taken up for execution after collection of necessary funds on an assessment of the quantum of loss. About 95,000 rural craftsmen and 57,340 small industrial units were the victims of flood. All their equipments/implements, stocked raw materials and finished goods were lost in the flood water. The rural craftsmen had no alternative but to seek assistance from the State Government. In response, the State Government came forward with a concrete programme the implementation of which has already led to normal production for the small industrial units and numerous units of rural craftsmen. These craftsmen were allowed grant at a specific rate while owners of small industrial units were sanctioned loan and subsidy.

The question of revitalising the rural agricultural economy posed an insurmountable problem. 15 lakhs of small and marginal farmers and 20 lakhs of landless agricultural labourers suffered loss in the flood. They lost their agricultural implements and livestocks. More than 2 lakh livestocks were washed away in the flood. All the big installations offering irrigation facilities were rendered defunct. The entire irrigation system in a vast area collapsed following crack-down of the Tilpara Barrage and Hinglow Dam. The loss of crops from about 34 lakh acres of land caused by the flood was valued at Rs. 200 crores. To combat this most difficult situation a programme was taken up on crash basis under which the affected farmers were due to be assisted in such a manner that they could become self-reliant within the shortest possible time and could compensate the huge losses sustained by them. At first the work of removal of accumulated sand from arable land was taken up. This was followed by the work of restoration of the irrigation system. The Tilpara Barrage was repaired in a record time leading to the supply of water from the Barrage at the appropriate time during the Rabi and Boro seasons. The water from the Hinglow Dam could be made available to the farmers during the Kharif season. The repairs of small irrigation installations were completed long before the scheduled time. The programme of restoration of the irrigation system also made provisions for extension of irrigation facilities during the Rabi and Boro seasons and for ensuring highest rate of production by supplying inputs of all varieties. The work continued according to the pro-

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gramme drawn up and this resulted in a yield of crops during the next Rabi and Boro seasons which was more than the loss sustained in the Kharif season.

The flood control system suffered huge losses during the flood of 1978. The embankments could not withstand the high waves of flood both turbulent and irresistible. The flood water overflowed the tops of the embankment and reached the other side washing away everything on its way. As a result, thousands of small/or big breaches appeared on many embankments/barrages. In some cases embankments running into miles were simply washed away. About 2,500 kms long embankments got damaged while breaches of different sizes numbering 12,368 appeared on the embankments. But this huge quantum of repairs could be completed within the scheduled time. A number of drainage schemes was executed in order to make arrangements for draining out excess water at the time of high floods. A part of the east Mograhat drainage scheme had been completed early last year. This would help proper drainage of water from about 1,03,000 acres of land in the district of 24-Parganas. The embankments of the Hooghly river have been raised to some extent in order to ensure protection of Calcutta and its neighbouring industrial areas having high density of population. The embankments on the river Silabati have been raised for the protection of flood-prone areas in the district of Midnapore. Moreover, an area measuring 870 sq. kms in the villages has been made safe and well-protected against floods by reconstruction of a number of small embankments.

BANK LOANS FOR THE BARGADARS (SHARE-CROPPERS) :

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Previously banks were of the view that the bargadars (share-croppers) were not eligible for loans from banks because they had no right over land. Moreover, they were considered very poor, incapable of loan repayment. But in 1979 the United Bank of India and the State Bank of India sanctioned loans to some bargadars on experimental basis which were duly repaid by the beneficiaries in time after the harvest.

Bargadars are now being given certificates of land after the latest Settlement Operation. As a result, banks will no longer find any difficulty in sanctioning loans against such certificates.

Arrangements for disbursement of bank loans in 23 selected areas in 12 districts of the State have been made. A question may naturally arise why only 23 regions have been selected and what criteria have been fixed for such selection. As is well-known banks grant loans only on fulfilment of certain terms and conditions prescribed for this purpose. Further, it is somewhat difficult for poor people to fill in loan applications or to draw up loan papers with all requisite certificates. So Government Officers have now come forward to do this part of the job. The services of a large number of officers would,

however, be required if the work is to be expanded further. Banks are also of the opinion that they will operate the programme in those areas only where bargadars and pattadars are present in one compact block. Moreover, they are willing to cover those areas where field officers from respective banks are working. They want to run this scheme on a modest scale now to see if the loans sanctioned to the bargadars and pattadars are repaid in time. If everything goes well with the banks, then only they will think about further expansion of the programme. Under the current programme S. B. I., U. B. I., United Commercial Bank, Central Bank of India and the Nadia District Cooperative Bank and the three Gramin Banks are issuing loans to the bargadars, pattadars, etc. So the future of this programme depends on due and timely repayment of loans advanced to the bargadars, pattadars during the current Kharif season. This would facilitate extension of activities under this improved financing programme to the whole of the State in the near future. The State Government has, therefore, requested the cultivators concerned to make repayment of bank loans as soon as the harvesting of Kharif crops is over. No interest is payable to the banks for timely repayment of instalment of loans. This would ensure sanction of loans from the respective banks to the individual cultivator during the next rabi season. Further, for such timely repayment of previous loans an individual cultivator will continue to get bank loans till he becomes self-reliant.

To make this scheme a success and to cover wider areas under this programme it is necessary for the bargadars and pattadars themselves to come forward to take advantage of its provisions. According to the existing procedure only recorded bargadars and pattaholders of Government land are eligible for bank loans. So it is the responsibility of the individual bargadars to approach the settlement KGO/s to get their names duly recorded. Further, it is not easy for individual bargadars or pattaholders who are mostly ill-educated to fill in applications for bank loan or to procure various types of certificates required for obtaining such loan all on their own.

On 18.8.79 Minister of Finance, Government of West Bengal had a thorough discussion with the top ranking bank officials about the scope and prospects of accommodating larger number of recorded bargadars, pattaholders of Government land under this financing programme. The Chief Minister was also present at that meeting. It was decided that during the next Kharif season interest-free bank loan @ Rs. 500/- per acre of land would be provided to 4 lakh bargadars, marginal farmers and landless peasants in West Bengal. This loan would be given primarily for raising Kharif crops as also for meeting the financial commitment of individual peasant family in times of distress (off-seasons). It was also decided that Revenue/Settlement Officers, B.D.O.s, Officers of the Agriculture Department and of General Administration would take up the work

in collaboration with the local bank officials, in order to make available the quantum of loan to the farmers without any hindrance.

In view of the aforesaid decisions it is very much necessary for the bargadars and pattaholders of Government land to get themselves organised in such a manner that active, educated and diligent members of each individual samity in any locality could get the work of procuring bank loans done on behalf of all bargadars, pattaholders, etc. in that locality in close liaison with the bank officials, J.L.R.O.s, B.D.O.s, etc.

IRRIGATION : Measure of Relief :

Total cultivable land in West Bengal is 1 crore 38 lakh acres of which irrigated land is only 36%. The major part of irrigation is available during rainy season in Kharif crops. For Rabi and Boro cultivation irrigation is not available for more than 10% of the land.

During United Front Government in 1969-70, in minor irrigation schemes the rate of irrigation tax per acre for each crop was Rs. 15 only. In the Damodar and in other river projects in Kharif or Aman seasons the rate was Rs. 12.50, whereas in Rabi or Boro it was Rs. 15 only. During the Congress regime in 1975, the irrigation tax in minor irrigation schemes was enhanced as follows : for Kharif or Aman Rs. 19.20 per acre ; for Wheat Rs. 24 per acre and for Boro Rs. 96.50 per acre.

In 1976 the same Congress Government amended the Damodar irrigation tax and made provisions to fix irrigation tax under this project like that of minor irrigation projects.

In the Damodar Project area near about one and a half lakh acres are supplied with irrigation water and for that the amount of irrigation tax charged was rupees twenty two lakhs (Rs. 22 lakhs). By the new amendment the charge was enhanced to Rs. 2.40 lakhs.

In CADP area the irrigation tax was charged not on the basis of crop, but on the basis of hours irrigation water is supplied. Apart from rain water, 12 inches water is necessary for each acre of Aman cultivation, for Wheat also 12 inches water and for Boro 48 inches. For each acre inch the charge was Rs. 10. After the fall of United Front Government in 1970, the burden of irrigation tax fixed by the Congress Government was as follows :

Irrigation Tax Per Acre

Crop	*U. F. Govt. 1969–70*	*Congress Govt. 1975–76*	*Congress Govt. CADP*
Aman ...	Rs. 15.00	19.20	120.00
Wheat ...	Rs. 15.00	24.00	120.00
Boro ...	Rs. 15.00	96.50	480.00

The Left Front Government has appointed a Commission to examine the existing rates of irrigation and to make suggestions for the principle as well as the rate of irrigation taxes.

In the meantime, the rate of irrigation tax in CADP area has been reduced to Rs. 5 per acre inch in place of Rs. 10.

In Damodar and Kangsabati river projects as well as in minor irrigation projects the irrigation tax has been reduced as follows: for an acre of Aman Rs. 15, for Wheat Rs. 20 and for Boro Rs. 50 (in place of 96.50). In 1975-76, a peasant both in minor irrigation or river irrigation projects had to pay for an acre of Aman, Wheat or Boro Rs. 139.70, now he will have to pay only Rs. 85 only. The Left Front Government has reduced irrigation tax in CADP area by 50%, and in other areas by 40%.

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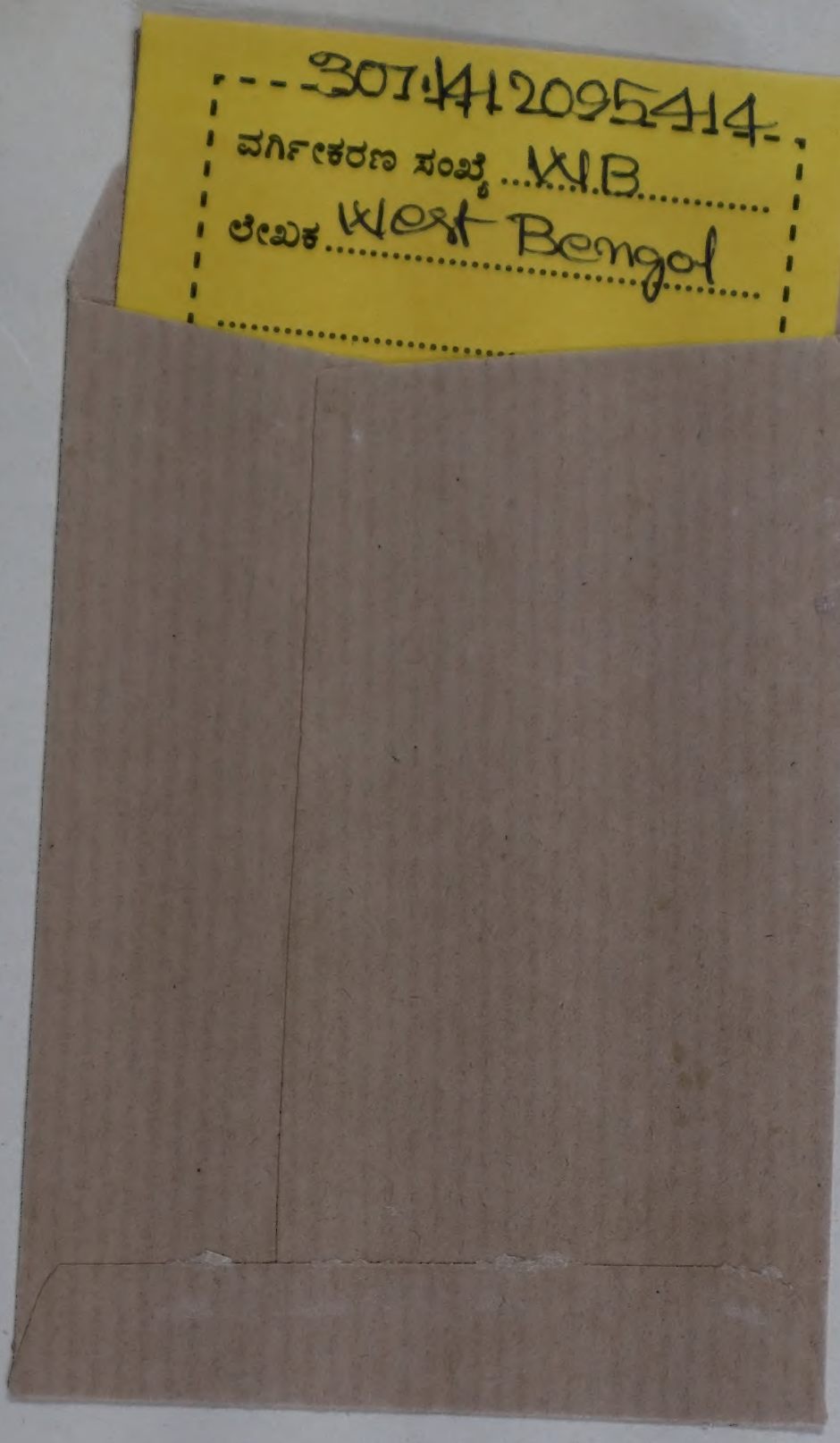
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